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Source: *Mongolian Studies*, Vol. 1 (1974), pp. 5-14

Published by: Mongolia Society

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43193015>

Accessed: 07-07-2015 05:40 UTC

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**THE THIRTEENTH-CENTURY MONGOLS'
CONCEPTION OF THE AFTER LIFE: THE EVIDENCE
OF THEIR FUNERARY PRACTICES***

John Andrew Boyle

The conquests of Genghis Khan and his successors have ensured that the beliefs and practices of the thirteenth-century Mongols, still largely unaffected by the influences of Christianity, Buddhism and Islam, are referred to in the chronicles of almost every nation in Asia and Europe. By studying these references, not all of them equally accessible, it may be possible to form a clearer idea of religious and cultural traditions that go back through the pre-Islamic Turks, the Huns and the Scythians to the Indo-European and non-Indo-European peoples who inhabited the steppes and forests of Northern Eurasia some 3,000 years ago.

The Mongols—and no doubt those earlier peoples also¹—took an extremely materialistic view of the Otherworld. “They know nothing,” says the Franciscan John de Plano Carpini, who visited Mongolia in 1246, “of everlasting life and eternal damnation, but they believe that after death they will live in another world and increase their flocks, and eat and drink and do the other things which are done by men living in this world.”² They believed too that it was not only possible but necessary to take one’s belongings with one into the next world. Referring to their funeral customs in the case of the “less important men,” Carpini describes how such a person “is buried with one of his dwellings [i.e. a *yurt* or *ger*], sitting in the middle of it . . . And they bury him with a mare and her foal and a horse with bridle and saddle . . . so that he may have a dwelling in which to make his abode and a mare to provide him with milk, and that

*This preliminary version of a paper read at the Exeter Folklore Colloquium, 29 March – 1 April 1971, is published by courtesy of the Folklore Society.

he may be able to increase his horses and have horses on which to ride.²³ The provision of a horse, according to the Armenian Kirakos of Gandzak, writing c. 1241, was rather because there would be “fierce fighting” in the Otherworld, and both he and the other authorities specify, that the dead man’s weapons are included amongst the grave goods.⁴ It is tempting to see in the “fierce fighting” a reference to something like the “ever-lasting battle” in the Norse Valhalla,⁵ but perhaps the Mongols simply thought that conditions in this, as in other respects, would be the same in the next world as in the present one. As for the human victims, they were, in the main, as Kirakos says, the dead man’s male and female servants or slaves interred with him for the express purpose of waiting upon him in the world to come.⁶ Concubines too were provided—we are explicitly informed of the immolation of young women in the cases of Genghis Khan himself⁷ and of his grandson Hülegü, the first of the Mongol rulers of Persia⁸—but there was no ritual execution of a man’s wife, or wives, like the Indian suttee,⁹ it being believed that a woman, upon dying a natural death, would be restored to her husband as a matter of course.¹⁰ It was apparently in connection with this belief that widows were expected and sometimes compelled to re-marry within their husband’s family in accordance with a custom which is known to have existed amongst the Scythians. This is amply attested amongst the Huns and pre-Islamic Turks and was still followed by the Kazakhs and Kalmucks down to modern times.¹¹

This custom, which seems to have no Turkish or Mongol name, is called by anthropologists the levirate because of a superficial resemblance to the Mosaic law that required a man to marry his brother’s widow when the brother had died without male issue. That law is referred to in a well known passage in the New Testament,¹² in which the Sadducees lay before Christ the hypothetical case of a woman who, in accordance with the terms of the levirate, had been married in succession to each of seven brothers: “In the resurrection therefore, when they shall rise, whose wife shall she be of them? for the seven had her to wife.” The Sadducees’ question would have presented no difficulties to the medieval Mongols: the woman was, and remained, the wife of her first husband. In fact the Turco-Mongol custom differed widely from the Jewish both in scope and in purpose. The Mosaic law related to the marriage in certain circumstances of brother-in-law (Latin *levir*) and sister-in-law. The Turk or Mongol, on the other hand, might marry without restriction the widows

not only of his brothers, but also of his father (apart from his own mother) and paternal uncles. The custom even survived conversion to Islam. Thus the Il-Khan Ghazan (1295-1304) went through the Muslim marriage ceremony with a woman who had been the wife of his father Arghun (1284-1291) and his uncle Geikhatu (1291-1295).¹³ The Mongols of Persia do not, however, seem to have imposed the practice on their non-Mongol subjects. It was otherwise in China, where in 1272 the Great Khan Qubilai (our Kubla Khan) issued a series of decrees enforcing the application of this law to the Chinese, who had previously been subject to their own customary law, which strongly condemned such unions. Paul Ratchnevsky quotes from the Chinese official records several court cases in which a widow had been ordered against her inclination to marry her brother-in-law.¹⁴ That the levirate was enforced in Russia we know from an incident reported by Carpini. Andrew, son of Mstislav, a prince of the House of Chernigov, had been executed on a charge of "taking Tartar horses out of the country and selling them elsewhere." His younger brother came with his widow to petition Batu, the founder of the Golden Horde, not to confiscate their territory. The young man was ordered to marry his sister-in-law, and despite their protests and the woman's tears and cries they were forced to consummate the marriage.¹⁵ It emerges from this and the cases cited by Ratchnevsky that one of the purposes of the levirate was to protect the economic interests of the family; the main purpose was, however, to assure the restoration of the wife to her husband in the Otherworld, to which, in those ancient times when the custom of ritual execution was still observed, she would have actually accompanied him.

Apart, however, from the measures adopted with respect to his wife or wives, the means for enabling the dead man to continue his earthly existence in the Hereafter were provided, as we have already seen, by the funerary objects and the human and animal victims that were actually buried with him. Here it would be helpful to adduce the archaeological evidence, but this is at present almost totally non-existent, certainly as regards what may be called the Royal Tombs. Only in one case do we know the precise location of such a burial place. Hülegü, the first of the Il-Khans of Persia, and his son and successor Abaqá were laid to rest in a castle upon the summit of a great rock rising 1,000 ft. above the shore on the Island of Shahi in Lake Urmiya in Azerbaijan.¹⁶ Of Hülegü's funeral

we are told by the Persian historian Vassaf that, in accordance with the Mongol custom, a sarcophagus (he uses the word *dakhma*, which is applied to the Zoroastrian tower of silence) was constructed, vast quantities of gold and jewels were poured into it and several beautiful young women, dressed in sumptuous costumes were "made his bed-fellows."¹⁷ These tombs were rifled already in the Il-Khanid period; but the inaccessible site has never been scientifically examined. The Il-Khan's northern neighbours, the Khans of the Golden Horde, are believed to have been buried at Sarai-chik on the lower reaches of the Ural in what is now Western Kazakhstan. The site of the town, which was razed to the ground by the Cossacks in 1580,¹⁸ was excavated by Soviet archaeologists in 1937 and 1950, but they do not seem to have found any traces of the tombs.¹⁹ However, the most famous of these royal cemeteries was the *yeke qorūq*, the "Great Forbidden Sanctuary" of Genghis Khan. Already Carpini knew of its existence. "It is," he says, "where the Emperors, chiefs and all the nobles are interred, and wherever they die, they are brought thither if this can fittingly be done. A great deal of gold and silver is buried with them."²⁰ Marco Polo too tells us that

all the great kings descended from the line of Chingis Kaan are taken to be buried to a great mountain called Altai. [The cemetery, in fact, as we shall see, is to be sought much further east in the Kentei mountains.] And wheresoever the Great Lords of the Tartars may die, were it a hundred days' journey from that mountain, they must be taken there to be buried. Another wonder I will also tell you: when the corpses of these great Kaans are taken to that mountain, be it for a distance of forty days march, or more, or less, all the people met along the road followed by the corpse, are put to the sword by those who accompany the body, who say, "Go and serve your Lord in the next world." For they truly believe that all those whom they slay must serve their Lord in the next world . . . And you must know that when Mongu Kaan died [in 1259], more than 20,000 men who met the corpse when it was being taken to its burial were killed.²¹

The most precise details are given by Rashid al-Din.²² The site had been chosen by Genghis Khan himself. One day, when out hunting, he saw a

solitary tree. The sight of it pleased him and he sat for a while under its shade. Then turning to his attendants he said: "This place is suitable for my burial; remember it." When he died his words were recalled, and he was buried in that very spot. "It is said," Rashid goes on, "that in the very year of the burial, trees and grass grew beyond measure over that steppe, and now the wood is so thick that it leaves no passage and they do not know [which is] the original tree or the place of the burial, so much so that even the old keepers of the 'forbidden precinct' . . . do not find their way to it." Rashid adds that this was the burial ground, not only of Genghis Khan himself, but also of his youngest son Tolui and the latter's children—including the Great Khan Möngke, whose burial is mentioned by Marco Polo, and Qubilai, who in fact seems to have been buried elsewhere—and their descendants down to Rashid's time. Rashid speaks also of the troops which still in his day kept guard over the "Great Forbidden Precinct," at the place called Burqan Qaldun, to which he also gives the name of Buda Öndür. The first of these names has been interpreted as meaning either "Willow God" or "Buddha Cliff;" the second can only mean "Buddha Height." Burqan Qaldun has been pretty conclusively identified with the peak Kentei Qan in the Great Kentei in N.E. Mongolia, and the East German archaeologist, Johannes Schubert, has more or less pin-pointed the site of the "Great Forbidden Precinct."²³ It is now perhaps only a matter of time before the royal cemetery yields up its secrets, and we may then hope to be infinitely better informed about the customs and beliefs, not only of the Mongols, but of all the early Northern Peoples.

For the time being, however, we must fall back on the literary evidence. Carpini distinguishes between the methods employed in burying their "less important men" and their "chief men."²⁴ In the case of the latter, after filling in the pit, "they put grass over it as it was before so that no one may be able to discover the spot afterwards." "In the night-time," writes the Persian historian Juzjani (1193-1260), "the place is covered up, and horses are driven over it, in such a manner that not a trace of it remains."²⁵ In the *Yüan shih*, the standard history of the Yüan or Mongol dynasty, it is stated: "[For Imperial funerals] when they reached the burial mound (*ling*), the earth removed to dig the pit was made into lumps which were disposed in [due] order. Once the coffin had been lowered [into the pit], [the pit] was filled and covered in the order [of the

lumps]. If there was earth in excess, it was carried to other places far away." Finally, a Chinese envoy who visited Mongolia *ca.* 1232, reports: "The tombs . . . of [the Mongols] have no mound; they are trodden over by horses so as to appear as the even [ordinary] ground."²⁶ The secrecy of the Royal Cemetery at Burqan Qaldun was, as we have seen, further enhanced by the growth of trees over the site. These trees were perhaps deliberately planted. Carpini tells us how Genghis Khan's son and first successor Ögedei, "left behind a grove to grow for his soul, and he ordered that no one was to cut there, and anyone who cuts a twig there, as we ourselves saw, is beaten, stripped and maltreated. And when we were in great need of something with which to whip our horse, we did not dare to cut a switch from there."²⁷ I have suggested that this grove was somewhere on the southern slopes of the Saur mountains in Northern Sinkiang, where according to Rashid al-Din the Great Khan lies buried and where his son Güyük may also have been laid to rest: it would appear to be the exact counterpart to the "great wood" which grew up around the burial place of Genghis Khan at Burqan Qaldun.²⁸

The custom, reported only by Marco Polo, of putting to death all persons who met the funeral *cortège* along its route was presumably also designed to preserve the secrecy of the burial site. So too was the better attested custom of closing the roads when a ruler died, and laying a ban on all movement from place to place.²⁹ The motives underlying the secrecy are not clear: it was hardly intended as a precaution against grave-robbers, but would seem to be connected in some way, as in fact Carpini indicates, with the rank of the dead man. Certainly in the case of "less important persons" the position of the tomb, far from being kept secret, was rendered more conspicuous by the erection of one or more horse skins over the site. I have discussed this practice at some length in two articles published in the *Central Asiatic Journal*³⁰ but am far from satisfied with the tentative explanations which I then offered. Since the dead man is provided in the grave itself with a mount or mounts for use in the other world or on the journey thither, the impaling of horses above the grave would appear to have some other significance. Nevertheless this is the explanation offered, three centuries earlier, by the Arab traveller Ibn Fadlan with reference to the same practice amongst the Oghuz Turks. After the dead man has been interred and his tomb roofed over with a "kind of clay dome" his companions,

betaking themselves to his horses . . . kill a hundred, two hundred or [only] one of them according to their quantities. They eat the flesh of these except the head, legs, hide and tail, which they suspend on wood. And they say: "These are the horses on which he shall ride to Paradise" And sometimes they neglect to kill the horses for a day or two, and an old man, one of their elders, will exhort them saying: "I saw so-and-so, (meaning the dead man) in my sleep and he said to me: As you see, my companions have got ahead of me and my feet are sore from following them. I cannot catch up with them and have been left all alone." Upon this they betake themselves to the horses, kill them and hang them up alongside his tomb. And after a day or two that old man goes to them and says: "I saw so-and-so and he said: 'Tell my family and my companions that I have caught up with those that got ahead of me and have rested from my weariness.'"³¹

According to Ibn Fadlan's account then, the purpose of impaling horses over a tomb was, quite unequivocally, to provide the dead man with the means of transport into the next world. On the other hand, the suspension of horse hides as a sacrifice to the Sky-God is recorded amongst the Khazars of Northern Daghestan at the end of the seventh century, amongst the Finnic and Turkic peoples—Cheremiss, Mordvins and Chuvash—along the Volga down to the eighteenth century, and amongst the Altaian Turks in what is now the Gorno-Altai Autonomous Region down almost to the present day. I had therefore suggested in the second of my articles that the horses impaled above medieval graves might likewise have been intended as offerings to the Sky-God, the more so as the sixteen horse skins suspended over a Kipchak (Coman) grave described by William of Rubruck were so disposed that four of them were facing "each quarter of the world," i.e., each of the four corners of the heavens.³² I am inclined now rather to compare this practice with the Scythian custom (described by Herodotus in a famous passage)³³ of setting up a circle of 50 impaled horses and riders around the Royal Tombs. It may well be that the Mongols borrowed this form of burial from their Turkish subjects; it may be that the secret cemeteries in which their rulers and princes of the blood were laid to rest were a recent innovation; or it may be that these latter, which appear to have been situated high in the mountains,³⁴ as near

as possible to the Sky-God, represent a different but equally archaic tradition.

NOTES

1. "In heaven you will be as amongst the living." So an eighth-century Turk addresses the Khan's brother in one of the Orkhon inscriptions. Quoted by Jean-Paul Roux, *La Mort chez les peuples altaïques et médiévaux d'après les documents écrits* (Paris, 1963), p. 100.
2. Christopher Dawson (ed.), *The Mongol Mission* (London, 1955), p.12.
3. Ibid, p.13.
4. See J.A. Boyle, "Kirakos of Ganjak on the Mongols," *Central Asiatic Journal*, VIII/3 (September, 1963), pp. 199-214 (204).
5. See H.R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (London, 1964), pp. 152-153.
6. See Boyle, "Kirakos of Ganjak . . ." loc. cit.
7. On the occasion of a ceremony lasting three days following the enthronement in 1229, two years after Genghis Khan's death, of his son and successor, Ögedei (1229-1241). See Juvaini, *The History of the World-Conqueror* (Manchester, 1958), Vol. I, 189. Rashid al-Din's abridgement of this passage is worth quoting in full: "And when he [i.e. Ögedei] had done with feasting and making presents he ordered that in accordance with the ancient *yasaq* and their usage and custom they should provide victuals for the soul of Chingiz-Khan, and should choose forty beautiful girls of the race and seed of the emirs that had been in attendance on him and, having decked them out in precious garments embroidered with gold and jewels, dispatch them along with choice horses to join his spirit." See *The Successors of Genghis Khan*, trans. Boyle (New York, 1971), p. 31. Where and how these human and animal victims were put to death is not stated. The time interval between and immolation is interesting and reminds one of the fifty attendants and fifty horses that were sacrificed a year after the burial of a Scythian king. See below, p. 7 and note 33. The preparation of victuals for Genghis Khan's soul presumably refers to the ceremony in which food was burnt by the Mongols in honour of their ancestors. The *Yüan shih* describes this ceremony as performed at the court of the Great Khan in China:

In the 9th lunar month of every year as also [on a day] after the 16th of the 12th lunar month there are used [for the sacrifice] in the courtyard where the food is burnt: one horse, three sheep, koumiss, spirits and wines as well as three rolls each of red fabric, gold-embroidered silk and coarse silk for underwear. At the Emperor's command a high Mongol court official accompanied by Mongol shamans and shamanesses, has to dig a hole in the ground to burn the [sacrificial] meat in. They also burn spirits and wines mixed [with the meat]. The shamans and

shamanesses call out the personal names of the dead rulers in the national language and make the sacrifice.

- See Paul Ratchnevsky, "Über den mongolischen Kult am Hofe der Grosskhanen in China" in *Mongolian Studies* ed. Louis Ligeti (Budapest, 1970), pp. 417-443 (429).
8. See below, p. 3 and note 16.
 9. There seems in fact to be no reliable evidence for the execution of the widow at any period in the history of the peoples of Northern Asia. See Jean-Paul Roux, "La Veuve dans les sociétés turques et mongoles de l'Asie centrale," *L'Homme*, IX/4 (1969), pp. 51-78 (60-63).
 10. ". . . as regards a widow they believe that she will always return to her first husband after death." See *The Journey of William of Rubruck to the Eastern Parts of the World, 1253-55 . . .*, trans. and ed. W.W. Rockhill (London, 1900), p. 78.
 11. See A. Zeki Validi Togan, *Ibn Fadlan's Reisebericht* (Leipzig, 1939), pp. 129-131, Roux, *La Mort . . .*, pp. 108-112, *idem*, "La Veuve . . ." pp. 66 ff.
 12. Mark xii, 18-24.
 13. See Boyle, "Political and Dynastic History of the Il-Khans," in *Cambridge History of Iran* Vol V (1968), pp. 303-421, (380).
 14. "The Levirate in the Legislation of the Yuan Dynasty" in *Asiatic Studies in honour of Dr. Jitsuzō Tamura* (Kyoto, 1968), pp. 5-62.
 15. Dawson, op. cit. pp. 10-11.
 16. See V. Minorsky, *Iranica* (Tehran, 1964), p. 47 and note 2; also the article "HÜLÄGÜ" in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2nd ed.).
 17. *Geschichte Wassaf's* ed. and transl. Hammer-Purgstall (Vienna, 1856), p. 97.
 18. See V.V. Bartołd, "The Burial Rites of the Turks and the Mongols" transl. J.M. Rogers in *Rashid al-Din Commemoration Volume* (1318-1968) ed. J.A. Boyle and K. Jahn (Wiesbaden, 1970), pp. 195-227 (221).
 19. See the *Bolshaya Sovetskaya Entsiklopediya* s.v. "SARAICHIK"
 20. Dawson, p. 13.
 21. *The Travels of Marco Polo* ed. L.T. Benedetto, transl. Aldo Ricci (London, 1931), pp. 83-84.
 22. See Boyle "The Burial Place of the Great Khan Ögedei," *Acta Orientalia* (1970), pp. 45-50 (45-47).
 23. In a paper read at the Second International Congress of Mongolists at Ulan Bator, September, 1970.
 24. Dawson, pp. 12-13.
 25. The passage is quoted in full in Boyle, "Kirakos of Ganjak . . ." pp. 204-7, note 32; *idem*, "A Form of Horse Sacrifice amongst the 13th and 14th century Mongols," *Central Asiatic Journal* X/3-4 (December, 1965), pp. 145-150 (145).
 26. See Paul Pelliot, *Notes on Marco Polo I* (Paris, 1959), p. 333.
 27. Dawson, p. 13.
 28. See Boyle, "The Burial Place . . .," p. 50.
 29. See Rashid al-Din, *The Successors of Genghis Khan*, p. 185 and note 29.
 30. "Kirakos of Ganjak . . ." and "A Form of Horse Sacrifice . . ." See above, notes 4 and 25.
 31. "A Form of Horse Sacrifice . . ." pp. 149-150.

32. Op. cit. 148-149. It is tempting to seek some connection between the positioning of the horse-skins over the Kipchak grave and the belief amongst modern Altaic peoples that the stars are a great drove of horses, for which the cosmic pillar serves as a mighty tethering-post. See Uno Holmberg-Harva, *Finno-Ugric, Siberian* (Boston, 1927), p. 337, *idem*, *Die religiösen Vorstellungen der altaischen Völker* (Helsinki, 1938), p. 40. I am indebted to Mrs. A. Talbot for this suggestion.
33. IV, 71-72. For a translation of the passage see E.D. Phillips, *The Royal Hordes* (London, 1965), pp. 69-71.
34. Bartol'd "The Burial Rites . . ." p. 204.